Service for Preparation for Holy Communion April 6, 1966

THE SUFFERING CHRIST
Isaiah 53: 1-9

The question of human suffering is one that has weighed heavily on the mind of man from time immemorial. Why is there suffering? Why is it that some men suffer terribly, while others seem to be by-passed? Why do good men suffer while "not-so-good" men seem to thrive? Is there any meaning at all to human suffering? On and on the questions have proceeded down through the centuries into our own day. Our best weapon against suffering seems to be to ignore it: to pretend that it doesn't exist - or if it does - only in faraway places - to other people. Even death has its peculiar disguises in our culture - disguises created by an industry which falsely assumes that ~~the best thing for a man is~~ man needs to avoid the reality of death and thus escape, or at least prolong, and postpone, the inevitable suffering.

Generally speaking, we know very little about suffering. Compared to the rest of humanity, we are quite free of suffering's traditional vehicles - famine, flood, war, natural disaster. But even to us, suffering comes - perhaps in loneliness or frustration, or physical illness. To all of us, suffering comes when we lose someone very dear to us - a close relative or friend. And when it comes, we, too, ask the age-old questions - Why? What does it mean? Why did it have to happen? Why did it have to happen to me?

There are basically two popular answers to our questions ~~that are popular~~. The first is that God is responsible for suffering: that when it comes, it is his intent for us. This is based on a theology that assumes that whatever happens is God's will, and while it comes easily to our minds, and does provide a kind of cheap comfort - it runs squarely into everything we believe and know about God. It sounds so right - and yet, what of the four year old child who dies a slow and extremely painful death of luekemia? Could this be the same God in whose name Jesus was speaking, when he said, "Whoever harms such a little one, better for him had he hung a stone about his neck and

drowned in the sea". It sounds so right until someone close to us dies in an automobile accident. In short, to blame God for human suffering may be convenient; it may provide and easy exit from the uncomfortable predicament of thinking about suffering - but it does not bear up at all in human experience. Furthermore, to take this position is to miss entirely - what the Judeo-Christian tradition does teach about suffering.

The second basic answer is that God has nothing whatever to do with human suffering; that our lives are guided by fate - and when your number is up, it's all over. The antidote to suffering, within this context then, is to discipline oneself to keep a stiff upper lip; to face life courageously and stoically take whatever comes. This approach, too, however, is woefully inadequate when applied to the reality of human experience. I have seen personal suffering and i've yet to hear a person in a hospital say, "such is life". I've yet to see someone respond to the deathof a loved one with "I guess his number was up".

When suffering comes - it comes hard. It opens up a level of experience unknown to us, and for many people when it comes they find themselves unprepared and ill-equipped to deal with it. And again the questions are asked: Why? Why has this thing happened?

The question was asked some 7,500 years ago by the Israelites languishing in Babylonian captivity. Forcefully torn from their homes, carried off in exile to an alien land, they too lifted their voices in despair and asked, "Why?". They had been taught that they were the chosen people of the one sovereign God. They were his people; his nation. Why, of all the people of the world, should they have to suffer. Their questions were anticipated and answered by the man who wrote the latter portion of the book of Isaiah. I read a portion of that very moving bit of literature this evening. In the 53rd Chapter, the prophet speaks of the Lord's servant as one who suffers because he is the servant. Written in the masculine gender, the prophet told that the servant was "despised and rejected" of men, wounded for our

transgressions, oppressed and afflicted." He was referring, of course, to the Hebrew nation. Israel's mission was to suffer - in a sense to suffer for all men; to show forth the glory of the one God by remaining faithful, even in the worst pangs of suffering.

It was this idea of suffering as mission that is carried over in the New Testament in the life of Jesus Christ. There can be do doubt that Jesus understood himself and his task in the light of this idea; and there can be no doubt that He, and the Gospel writers, were deeply influenced by this particular passage from the Book of Isaiah.

Israel's suffering was vicarious - that is, suffering on behalf of some one else; in a sense, they were the suffering substitutes for the Babylonians, Persians, Assyrians and Egyptians. None of which could match Israel's history for sheer tragedy. Jesus Christ, then, is the final act in this historical drama. He was the suffering servant. He did suffer for all men; his was "on behalf of suffering". In a very real sense Jesus Christ - on the cross - is understood as a substitute for every man. And through his suffering, all men have been provided a way of salvation.

I believe, however, that we make the mistake of confining Christ's suffering to the crucifixion alone. Actually it was, from start to finish, an entire life time of suffering. It began in the dirt and dust of a cow barn; it progressed through tortuous years of misunderstanding. It matured in lonliness and isolation and it ended in complete failure. Certainly no one was so badly misunderstood as Jesus of Nazareth. He was almost stoned to death by his own neighbors; he was called a glutton and a drunkard; even his own disciples, to a man, radically misunderstood almost everything he said and did. There is great suffering here.

Certainly no man has been so terribly alone as Jesus of Nazareth. The inability of his friends to understand him created a gap between them. How alone he must have felt, for instance, when two of them began to argue about which would be first in the Kingdom of God. How alone he must have felt - when even Peter refused to accept his mission of suffering. How utterly alone he must have felt - when in his hour of greatest need, they fell asleep. How alone he was - when they all ran away; when Peter denied even knowing him. How alone he was - between two thieves on a barren hill. It takes a certain amount of creative imagination to understand this kind of aloneness. When we suffer, even an appendicitis, we are surrounded by the concern and love and presence of family and friends. But he died - alone - completely and utterly abandoned. There is real suffering here. Suffering apart from the particular agony of crucifixion.

Again, the worst we can imagine is probably not enough. Crucifixion was a peculiarly, Roman device reserved for the worst criminals. It was meant to be a public example, as much as brute (?) punishment; and it succeeded effeciently in both respects. The victim was either tied or nailed to a cross; stripped of his clothes and hung up to die slowly - in full view of anyone who wanted to watch. Death by crucifixion came by several way: the combination of the loss of blood and exposure in the burning sun; suffocation from lung collapse - due to dislocation of the shoulders. It is good, I believe, to think in these indelicate terms when we consider the crucifixion - and especially as we think about Jesus' suffering. We are safe in saying, that though the very worst happens to us, we will never be called on to suffer the horrible agonies endured by our Lord.

Now, up until this point our thinking has been generally academic - a recital of facts and historical doctrine. Jesus Christ suffered - in the same way as the Israelite nation suffered - and mankind is thereby redeemed. But what does this say about God in relation to our suffering. What

resources are then here to cope with whatever forms of suffering we are called upon to endure?

Just this -- and this is the point I think most people miss. It was not just a man who suffered. Jesus was not just a good Jew who took on himself the historic burden of his people. It was God who suffered. This is the real issue - and the one many people miss. Neitsche, a classical opponent of orthodox Christianity, was fond of observing that he never met a person who fully understood the affirmation "God on a cross". This is what is at stake here. "God was,in Christ, reconciling the world to himself." Jesus Christ was God incarnate. When he suffered - God suffered,

This is the idea that must be injected into our thinking about suffering; we believe in a suffering God.

Now let's be absolutely clear about one thing. This in no answer to the questions - Why? Why must we Suffer? In fact, let's have the courage at this point to say that there is no answer to that one; that suffering is simply part of life - and that it makes no more sense to blame it on God, than it does to say that God was responsible for the indigestion we got from eating the onions ~~we ate~~ last night. Let's stop reaching for cheap comfort when tragedy strikes - by blaming it on God.

And then, Let's go the direction the cross is pointing - to a suffering God. I would suggest that there is more here than an easy, trite answer. I would suggest that there is here the power to cope with suffering - and the comfort to be healed and restored.

It's always difficult to draw a simple analogy to a point of theology, but let me try. I can remember,as a little boy, having an ear ache. An ear ache severe enough to make me cry. And I can remember sitting on my father's lap, knowing that he was suffering because I was suffering. It didn't take away the pain; but it did make it bearable. It did a great deal to know and to feel the love of someone who was suffering right along with me. We've all had these experiences with our own children; we have

felt the pain when they fall; we've, perhaps, wept when they were bitterly disappointed. We've all felt the need to have someone near when we suffer; We've all extended a comforting hand to someone we love. Because, in a very real sense we are suffering with them.

This is precisely what the cross of Jesus Christ tells us about God. He suffers with us; he is there with us in pain and grief and disappointment. Like a father to his children - God feels our pain; our tears are his tears also. Even in death - God shares each experience with us, for he has been there, too. He has been through the valley of the shadow of death - and even there, our suffering is his suffering.

And how do we know this? We know it because God was in Christ; Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, and he experienced the fullness of human life to its last, most bitter dregs. Jesus Christ was misunderstood, alone - he cried out in dispair, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me", and he died. Because he did - - -

We know this about God --that he shares our pain; that he stands ready to share and to help us bear whatever we might have to endure.

We know this about God - because he came, because he was incarnate in the suffering Christ.

Amen.